

WHO'S GUILTY?

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Novelization By
Mrs. Wilson Woodrow

Story No. 12

WEIGHED IN THE BALANCE

The twelfth of a series of separate stories dealing with the commission of crimes inviting judgment upon both actual guilt and real responsibility.

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JOHN CLARK'S father died in battle. Not the less so, because the only weapons involved were brains and money instead of steel and hot lead.

John Clark had begun life as a mill hand. By sheer cleverness, by tireless industry, by an almost unquenchable power over his fellow-men, he had fought his way upward until he was President of the great mills which he had entered, a quarter century earlier, as a day laborer.

But he was a manufacturer, not a financier. His directors presently formed a clique to oust him from power and to put one of their own henchmen in his place.

The clique's chance came when they lured Clark into a merry financial deal whose nature they misrepresented to him. As a result, when the President's day entered the board room for a conference he found the directors already plotting against him. One of them opened the attack by saying curtly:

"You have failed to redeem the stock you pledged for the C. G. & E. Mills. We have taken it up. The control of the mills has therefore passed to us. We deeply regret, of course."

"I will take your regrets for granted, gentlemen," interrupted Clark, "and I will not waste your time by telling you what I think of this underhand deal. You have tricked me out of power. You have the whip-hand. If you expect me to cringe under the whip or to whine for mercy, you do not know John Clark. You want my resignation as President, of course. It will be in your Secretary's hands within half an hour. Good day."

Turning on his heel he strode out of the room and back to his own private office. He had promised to land in his resignation within thirty minutes. In a long lifetime of business activity, that was the one and only promise John Clark ever broke.

But as he reached his desk, a sudden sharp pain in the left side sent him staggering into the nearest chair. He groped fumbling at his collar and mumbled a few gaspingly incoherent words.

Before his secretary and stenographer could hurry across the room to the stricken man, he slid limply from his chair to the floor, and lay there, motionless, in a curiously huddled and bent position.

The blow that had wrecked his future had also taken his life. The man had been too much for an already feeble heart action.

Thus did John Clark fight a life-long battle. This did he lose battle and life in one stroke. And it behooved his only son to take up the fight as best he could, to support his sister and his orphaned mother.

Tom Clark had been reared as a rich child's son. He was just ending his senior year at Yale when word came of his father's death and of the total wreck of the family fortunes.

He hurried home, and after he had finished his mother and sister in a little street cottage that seemed pitifully tiny and small, after their big house at Maple street, he began at once to seek some method of supporting them and himself.

Tom speedily discovered that his services were in no demand at all among the merchants and financiers of his little home town.

Some he came, discouraged and almost reluctant, after a week of fruitless search for work. To his mother he poured out the story of his troubles and of a plan that had been born of his failure.

"I don't understand," his father went in at twenty as a laborer at the mills over yonder. When he was fifty he was practically owner of the mills. His example is good enough for me. To-morrow morning I'm going over to the mills to see Mr. Carr, the new President. For Dad's sake he'll give me work there."

And in spite of all the protests of his mother and sister he held to his plan. Early next morning he sought an interview with Pelts, the new President. The latter—more because there was a shortage of men than from any sentiment about John Clark's memory—turned Tom over to Edna Carr, a department foreman, with orders to put him to work.

Carr, a powerful and grizzled veteran of the machine, received the President's orders in respectful silence, merely nodding to the applicant to follow him to his own department. At the moment he and Tom were alone in the corridor outside Pelts's office, the old foreman's manner underwent a lightning change. Wheeling, he grasped Tom's hands in both of his, exclaiming:

"Boy, I worked alongside your father, and then under his orders for thirty years. He was the whitest, blindest, squarest man the Lord ever made. There isn't a man in the mills that didn't love him and trust him. There isn't a man here who won't welcome John Clark's son and give him a square deal."

Inside a year Tom Clark was by all odds the most popular man in the mills, and he was by far the cleverest and quickest workman on his floor. He advanced rapidly, and he well deserved every advance. Old Joe Carr never to regard him almost as a son.

Before that first year was out, too, Joe Carr had still other reasons for liking fond of his young protégé. One was Carr's daughter, Edna, brought her father's lunch to the mills, as he had forgotten to take it with him in the morning.

As she approached Carr's desk, Tom Clark changed to be standing there, receiving some routine instructions.

Carr introduced the two young people to each other.

Tom, as he turned to acknowledge the introduction, found himself looking down into quite the most beautiful pair of eyes he had ever beheld. Vaguely, too, he noted that the eyes were set in a daintily flowerlike face, and that the face was upraised toward his own with an adorable expression of interest.

Something seemed to tug thrillingly at Tom Clark's hitherto immune heart. Completely to his own surprise, he found he had fallen victim to that mystically poetic malady known as "love at first sight."

Edna Carr, too, felt an unaccountable stirring at her heartstrings at this first meeting with the man of whom she had heard so much from her father. Already, from hearing of Tom's story, she had invested young Clark with all the attributes of a hero of romance. Now, his good looks, his magnetic personality and his oddly brilliant smile, combined with his very evident admiration of herself to finish the capture of her girlish heart.

Love had dawned, and courtship was quick to follow—an ardently adoring avian's wooing of a girl who met his lover's advances half way.

Tom did not actually propose, because he was not yet earning enough money to add the expense of a wife's support to that of a sister and a mother. But he worked all the harder at the mills in order to rise to a position with a salary that would permit him to marry, in addition to his present heavy expenses.

Kelly, the easy-going old superintendent of the mills, retired on pension. In his place the directors appointed a man who had won an enviable record for efficiency in another city's mills. His name was Agnew Graham. In age he was about thirty-five. He had a reputation for slave-driving and for wringing from the mills a list of results that were highly gratifying to the stockholders. Concerning his personal character, some rather unsavory stories were afloat. But the directors were out for results, not personal uprightness, so Graham was employed.

He worked the men cruelly hard; he was forever nagging at them and blaming them and docking their wages for imaginary delinquencies. He showed plainly that he regarded them as a breed of animal utterly inferior to himself. He wreaked petty grudges against such of them as he did not chance to like. He leered at their daughters and young sisters on the street in a way that made them want to kick him.

As for Tom, he concerned himself little with Graham. He did his own work and did it well. And, apart from that, all his thoughts were taken up by Edna Carr.

Though Tom took scant heed of Graham, yet, strangely enough, the new superintendent had given somewhat more attention to Tom, and this secret study on the part of Graham was at last voiced in a talk with Pelts, the president.

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"I've had my eye on him," interrupted Graham. "I've been watching him. You're right about his being a good worker. I'll grant that; but—"

"But what?" demanded Pelts. "That is all we hire him for. He's a hustler, and he doesn't presume on his father's name. What?"

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He left the office and started for the main entrance of the mills, where his automobile waited at the curb to carry him to his club for luncheon.

A heavy rain was falling and Graham stood on the entrance steps waiting for the shower to slacken so that he might reach his car without a wetting.

He noted that some one else, emerging from the building just ahead of him, was also waiting under the portico for the rain to abate. And a second glance at his fellow loiterer showed him she was a girl, young, neatly dressed and extremely pretty. Graham's dull eyes brightened. He took a step toward her.

"Pardon me," he said with a respectful civility that was a trifle overdone. "You don't work here, I think."

"No, sir," said the girl, who apparently recognized him. "I came to bring my father his lunch."

"Oh, your father is one of us, then?"

"Yes, sir. He is Joseph Carr, foreman in the—"

"Joe Carr?" put in Graham, with a cordiality that would have amazed the grumpy old foreman. "There isn't a better or more highly appreciated man in the place. I'm honored to meet his daughter. I am Agnew Graham, the superintendent."

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As for Edna, she found Graham very much to her liking. He was a better dressed, of more matured, of broader experience. The polished man of the world dazzled her and for a moment she almost forgot the image of poor Tom Clark from her heart.

Agnew Graham's wife, who would have every comfort that a large house could buy.

Richards had a quiet amusement had been an evening at a moving picture show, followed by a plate of ice cream and a trolley ride home. Now this was a very happy day for her.

No more the delightfully dainty and costly supper he ordered for her at roadside restaurants. No more theatre and opera.

Her inexperienced head was turned. Her head, but not wholly her heart. She was still, at bottom, true to its instincts, although these instincts just now were sadly muddled.

And when Graham asked her to be his wife she refused. But she couched her refusal in terms so respectful that he by no means abandoned hope. From her artless talk he had learned of Tom's love for her; but he had no fear from so lowly a rival. Indeed, Clark's adoration for Edna mildly amused him.

On the afternoon following the drive when Graham had proposed to Edna, a fellow-workman fell into step with Tom, as the day shift was tramping out of the mill.

"Heard the news?" the man asked Tom.

"What news?" queried Clark, with no great interest. The five hundred "Pop Carr" is due to have a swell non-in-law," was the reply. "A couple of the fellows know Graham's chauffeur. They were coming home from the lodge, along Pine Street, last evening, when Graham charged past them in that big blue car of his. The electric street light shone into the car, and the two chaps were passing, and there sat Graham with Pop Carr's

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On the doorstep he all but collided with a man who was just rushing toward the bell. It was Agnew Graham.

Graham's car stood at the gate, and the superintendent's first visit by daylight to the house of the girl he loved, and he was not over-pleased to meet Tom Clark coming out from the lock of watchfulness on Tom's face Graham rightly judged that the younger man's reception had not been favorable. And he grinned accordingly at him.

At sight of that grin Tom suddenly lost all control of himself. His heart's sick agony changed to a flash to murderous rage. With the wordless spell of a charging beast he flew at his rival.

He caught Graham by the throat in a blindness of fury and flung him to the ground, leaning over the prostrate man and snarling and growling like a rabid dog.

Graham, though caught unaware, had no mind to be threatened unexpectedly in the presence of the girl he wanted to marry. He was on his feet again as nimbly as any trained wrestler, and, ducking Tom's wild blow, ran in and grappled with him.

Edna, in the doorway, cried out in terror as the two men writhed and twisted in that fierce embrace of hate. A crowd quickly gathered at the gate. Unheeding, the two men battled on. Now the advantage was with one, now with the other.

Presently Tom's insane fury began to subside into a coldly homicidal rage. And, with coolness, came back his ability to use his mind and to control his passions.